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ABSTRACT

This paper provides information to American families who are interested in sponsoring Vietnamese refugees resettling in the United States. It traces the conditions that resulted in the coming of Vietnamese to this country following the end of American involvement in the Indochinese war and the subsequent unification of North and South Vietnam under a communist government. Misconceptions that many Vietnamese hold upon arrival in the United States--particularly, inflated expectations regarding financial aid--are described, and ways that sponsors can redress these misconceptions are outlined. The paper suggests that sponsors become acquainted with Vietnamese refugees. Briefly discussed are interpersonal and family relationships, mental and physical health, work attitudes, schooling, welfare, religion, privacy, gifts, hospitality, language, and the interpretation of gestures. (AOS)

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The Vietnamese:

THE CHALLENGE OF SPONSORSHIP

By

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August 1982

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THE VIETNAMESE

The Challenge of Sponsorship

I. Conditions in Vietnam

After the American involvement in the Indochina War came to an end in 1975 and Vietnam was united as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, political persecution and economic regimentation were quickly imposed on the South. Soon after unification, the government took or froze the assets of the well-to-do class and ordered a reeducation for professionals, former public employees, government officials, soldiers of the South Vietnamese army and all those who had worked with the U.S. government. Although such reeducation was originally proclaimed to be brief, for a vast number of people it has meant years of hard labor under harsh conditions in crowded camps. By and large, the fate of camp inmates has seemed to depend to a great extent on their confessions and on individual camp supervisors. The estimated number of persons still being detained at this time (1982) ranges from 10,000 to 100,000.

Economic conditions deteriorated rapidly as renewed warfare drained the country's resources. Full-scale fighting with Cambodia started in April 1977 and led to the occupation of the country by Vietnamese troops in December 1978, bringing over 300,000 Kampuchean refugees to Vietnam and creating an additional 700,000 displaced persons within Vietnam. In February-March 1979, China invaded the northern provinces.

While droughts, floods and parasites affected crops adversely, food production was also low because many farmers, compelled to sell their produce at low prices to the government, did not work the standard amount of time, i.e. about 250 days a year. Instead, some districts averaged 180-200 days a year, others a mere 100 days. In Saigon (Ho-Chi-Minh City), the price of rice and meat rose enormously and even in rural areas, prices, though lower than in the cities, were rising steadily, bringing hardship to the population. Commodity shortages and inflation led to closings of factories for want of raw materials and customers. Private trade was banned and stores owned by individuals closed in 1978, adding to the number of the unemployed.

In order to control the city population and to increase food production, many people were sent to the so-called New Economic Zones (NEZ). Initially, the government offered some help in getting the NEZs established by providing buffaloes, plows and seed. But, as the country's economic conditions deteriorated, the government could soon no longer afford to do so. Though there may have been some successful NEZs, reports circulating within and without Vietnam are primarily stories of extreme suffering, lack of food, no schools, disease in the absence of medical care, and of ineptitude of the military cadres running the NEZs.

Since late 1981, a relaxation of economic policies has brought about some improvement. Most workers in business and industry are state employees who receive monthly salaries, supplemented by ration cards for rice, fabrics, and other essentials at subsidized prices. At about ten times the price, many goods can also be obtained without ration cards on the open market. Professionals, such as doctors and pharmacists, are also state employees, but they may maintain private practices after hours. Under the new policies, farmers still have to produce a certain quota to sell to the government, but whatever they produce in excess of this quota, they are free to sell on the market, an incentive that has contributed to increased production during the past year.

II. Backgrourd of the Vietnamese Refugees

Vietnamese love their country and normally would not dream of leaving Vietnam. It is fair to say that most Vietnamese who have resettled in the U.S. long to go home and would probably do so if political conditions took a positive (in their view) turn.

The first wave of refugees which left Vietnam in 1975 consisted of highly educated and well-to-do people from South-Vietnam. Since 1979-80, when the Vietnamese government wanted the ethnic Chinese to leave the country, there have also been refugees from North-Vietnam. While most of them are ethnic Chinese, some North-Vietnamese have also taken opportunity to catch a boat.

A high percentage of refugees continues to come from the urban, educated class; but, since 1979-80, an increasing number of persons with little or no education have joined the ranks of refugees. Some educated persons turned farmer or fisherman only to be close to shore and thereby enhance chances for escape. Thousands have drowned by taking to the sea. Others did reach destinations in Thailand, Malaysia or China; but, more often than not, only after having been subjected to multiple pirate raids, robbery, rape, and potential death.

For years, people intent on leaving Vietnam gave money to police or military officers to facilitate departure, a pay-off which could increase the price for a space on a crowded ship to U.S. $2,000.00, sometimes even $3-4,000.00 in gold. Many times this money was lost when authorities learned of the imminent escape and arrested or jailed the would-be-refugees. Recent refugees, whether from the North or South, have tended to leave from secret places and paid considerably less than those who left before them.

Studies have documented that level of education and knowledge of English are prime factors in the adjustment of Vietnamese refugees to life in the U.S. Well-educated Vietnamese are likely to have been exposed to Western influence and to be familiar with many of the aspects of life in a Western country, such as hairdryers, vacuum cleaners, etcetera. Some refugees have been driving cars for years. Other Vietnamese arriving as refugees in the U.S., however, especially those from rural environments, have had no contact at

all with western ways of living: they may not know how to use a gas stove, and may need to be taught that you cannot chop a chicken on the kitchen floor.

Overlapping distinctions stemming from rural and urban backgrounds, there may be differences in adjustment between southerners and northerners. Twenty-five years of two economic systems, a free market economy in the south and a communist system in the north, have left imprints on the people. Southerners tend to be more accustomed to diversity and to taking initiative in making changes in their lives, while those from the north are more used to authority and rules regulating their activities. Since jobs were assigned to them by the government, northerners are less familiar with job hunting, job mobility, or even with continuing education. They may also be somewhat intimidated by the mere appearance of a police officer, because they associate police functions with control and surveillance. In view of recent history, more southerners speak English and are familiar with western ways than northerners.

Once in the refugee camps or in the United States, the relationship between northerners and southerners is less than cordial. Lifelong suspicion between the two from the war does not cease upon leaving Vietnam. There tends to be little association between the two groups, partially for fear that actions and opinions here will influence the fate of relatives left behind. Southerners also feel that some refugees from North-Vietnam, whether Vietnamese or Chinese, are sent here by the government for political purposes.

The relationship between Vietnamese and Chinese from Vietnam seems to be closer in the U.S. than it was in Vietnam, where both groups tended to live their separate lives with little interaction. When lacking enough companionship of their own kind, Chinese and Vietnamese will visit back and forth and enjoy each other as both coming from Vietnam.

No matter what the particular background of the refugees, chances are that conditions in Vietnam prior to departure, experiences during the flight, or a prolonged stay in refugee camps will affect in some way their state of mind during the early months in the U.S.

III. Orientation

Many Vietnamese arrive in the U.S. with somewhat inflated expectations of the financial aid available to them. Especially those from the north had little access to realistic information on America, but both, northerners and southerners, have been dreaming of the good life in the United States. In addition, a certain indignation about the U.S. having bombed and destroyed so much of their country may temporarily predispose some to accept public assistance as a form of retribution for past suffering. If they do arrive with that kind of outlook, they may go through a period of dissatisfaction before realizing that most people in America have to work for a living, and that they themselves will have to work hard in order to establish themselves. Confronted with this reality, they may idealize their past life in Vietnam, yearn for their homeland and consider their stay in the U.S. temporary.

One of the most crucial tasks of the sponsor is to establish a relationship of trust with the refugees. Almost all Vietnamese refugees will accord great respect to the sponsor. They will do nearly anything asked of them, and probably a great deal more. Some refugees show their respect by jumping to their feet when the sponsor enters the room, opening doors, etcetera. One refugee even proposed to give up a child to be adopted by the sponsor as a sign of appreciation. (Rest assured that offering a child is a polite gesture only. If you took the offer seriously, you may find family and child gone when the time came to sign the papers.)

The respect shown is genuine, but it is quite different from trust. One of the most obvious and effective means to establish a trusted sponsor-refugee relationship is by being interested in, and learning as much as you can about, their country and culture. Any large library probably has some current information on Vietnam. The Indochinese Refugee Assistance Program offers a variety of English material on Vietnamese culture, much of it free of charge. (Write to Indochinese Refugee Assistance Program, Room 1185, Donahoe Bldg., 330 Independence Avenue, S.W., Washington, D.C. 20201). Or ask for a bibliography of relevant material from the Center of Applied Linguistics, (Orientation Resource Center, 3520 Prospect Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20007; 202-298-9292). Excellent information is available in the Handbook for Mental Health Workers and Human Service Providers, entitled Working With Indochinese Refugees. For a free copy write to: J. Friedman, Indochinese Social Service Outreach Program, Traveler's Aid/Immigrants' Service League of Chicago, 1046 W. Wilson Avenue, Chicago, IL 60640; 312-435-4560. Even without engaging in much book study, it is easy to convey interest on a daily basis. You can ask the refugee how things are done in Vietnam, what expressions are commonly used, what food they like most; or, to their delight, reverse the roles of host and guest and let them enjoy cooking a Vietnamese meal for you. You also show your true concern and interest and gain their trust by introducing your refugee family to other Vietnamese. A subscription to one of the refugee-oriented Vietnamese magazines might also serve a similar purpose as well as help the refugee overcome loneliness due to poor English skills. (For example: Tien Phong, 15 N. Highland Street, Arlington, VA 22201; 703-522-7151; or, Hon Viet, P.O. Box 4279, Glendale, CA 91202; 203-244-0135).

Having the refugees live with you for at least a few days provides an advantage in that they can observe you and learn quickly how you do things in this country. If they move immediately into their own apartment, you may want to make sure that they can handle appliances and know how to live in an American house. Sometimes this means checking up on them after things have been explained. While the family will undoubtedly enjoy frequent visits, they may feel invaded if a sponsor comes to "visit" but walks around the apartment with an eagle eye to observe its condition, or opens the refrigerator to see what is left there. The "Asian" way under such circumstances would probably be to come for a visit, engage in a friendly conversation and under the pretext of fixing something, take a quick look around. If you do need to know what is left inside the refrigerator, it might be best to ask a mutual Vietnamese friend to find out what is needed.

It is possible that the refugee arrives with some misconceptions about sponsorship motivation. The kind of volunteering that the sponsor has done by

agreeing to help a refugee is little known in Vietnamese society. Vietnamese will exert their utmost efforts to help a relative or friend in need, and they may come forward readily when confronted with a fight in public, but they are unlikely to take in a stranger who comes without the recommendation of at least a friend. Economic conditions may have led the Vietnamese to traditionally take care of their own family at the expense of helping others, while political rivalry and strife over a prolonged period of time have contributed to a general distrust toward strangers. Seen in this light, it is understandable that many Vietnamese intuitively feel that someone must have ordered the sponsor to volunteer or that sponsorship involves substantial material benefits. Some refugees may ask you outright how much you are paid for sponsoring, while others just keep wondering. Rumors in camps also told of tax benefits.

Spare no efforts to convey your true motivation for sponsorship to your refugee family. In addition, knowing the possible assumptions, take extreme care with regard to all financial transactions. Some sponsors have found it best to not attach their name to the refugees' bank account in order to alleviate any fears. By helping the refugees to write thank you notes for all gifts and donated items coming from other people, you also increase their awareness of the voluntary and "not-for-profit" nature of sponsorship, while at the same time helping them along in learning about American customs.

Some refugees are aware that the government's grant to the resettlement agencies is higher than the amount the refugee receives. A portion of the grant must be retained by the agency to perform the core services required by contract with the government.

There is a great deal of secondary migration among Vietnamese refugees in the U.S., usually for reasons of family reunification, for wanting to be close to a large Vietnamese community, for a better climate, training, schooling, or (sometimes imagined) better job prospects. It is quite common for the Vietnamese not to make any long-term plans but to pick up and leave on the spot. Even when the refugee does have advance plans, he will probably shy away from confronting you with the unpleasant news. Instead, he will be more apt to drop little hints, perhaps about a telephone call or letter from a friend in another location. The decision to move away may seem foolhardy, especially if the family is already well established. You can help the refugees weigh the advantages against the disadvantages and suggest that one family member visit the location before making a decision. Naturally, the final decision will be theirs. The Vietnamese have proven their resourcefulness by finding the way and means to escape from Vietnam. With pride and independence in thought they may be sensitive to being overprotected. There are many things they do do not understand and appreciate being taught, but very soon they may not want to be told what they need and what they don't need, or what they can do and what they cannot do. If they feel over-powered, chances are they will move away quickly.

IV. Adjustment to Life in America

Family Relationships: In the long run, American society exerts pressure and influence on the Vietnamese family, but recent Vietnamese arrivals are likely to maintain their traditional family relationships for years to come. Vietnamese family relationships are close but "in order"; that is, each member knows where he/she stands in relationship to other people and abides by the known rules of behavior. Respect is given to men over women, and to older over younger persons. The male head of the family usually makes all major decisions, while the wife is the "soul" of the family, a person who sees herself as servicing the whole family and holding it together. While a husband may exhibit his anger at his wife, the wife is not likely to be swayed from her devotion to the well-being of her husband and her children.

Some women, especially those from urban backgrounds, are self-confident and independent, and, in an American environment, unafraid to divorce, if necessary. Many others, however, are more traditional, some to the extent that they take a step back when talking with men, or disliking the idea of shaking hands with men.

In Vietnam, children are a built-in social security system. They are brought up strictly, not uncommonly subject to physical punishment, and are taught to accept the decisions and wisdom of the elders. Parents demonstrate the proper parent-child relationships through respect accorded to their own parents, who in their old age should be made as happy as possible. Because of this respect, a grandfather or grandmother may have the ultimate say in the family.

Vietnamese refugees spend a great deal of time thinking, talking about, and missing their relatives who are left behind in Vietnam. The commonly shared ideal that the whole family being together means happiness makes uncles, aunts, and distant cousins all seem to be close to the heart, sometimes to a degree that prevents the refugees in the U.S. from concentrating his efforts on the here and now.

Interpersonal Relationships Outside the Family: While family relationships provide a basis for immediate and continued trust, close relationships with people outside the circle of relatives develop only gradually over a prolonged period of time. On meeting new people, Vietnamese are polite, yet probably somewhat distrustful, expecting a person to look for his/her own advantage. This general mistrust among peers accounts for divisions and personality conflicts common within Vietnamese groups.

In their daily contacts with people, Vietnamese take great care not to confront people with unpleasant facts, preferring to hold back their true opinions and dislikes. When asked whether they like a certain food, house, place, etc., they will almost certainly answer in the affirmative. Similarly, they may not admit that they do not understand a certain instruction. Rather than implying that you did not do a good enough job in explaining, they choose to face the consequence of not knowing (perhaps how to get to a certain place).

Often you can avoid misunderstanding by using a third party to find out the true situation or intentions, or by phrasing your questions in such a way that there is a choice.

Vietnamese will make every effort not to embarrass anyone, and they expect that others will spare them embarrassment. When they do find themselves in unpleasant situations, they tend to conceal their discomfort with a smile or laugh. With some sensitivity and practice, you learn to distinguish between laughs that express joy, embarrassment, or even anger; and you become increasingly adept at reading reactions and feelings more from facial expressions and body language than from verbal answers.

Achieving results, so important in American culture, is far less important to the Vietnamese than maintaining harmonious relationships, dignity and self-respect. The following story demonstrates the different approach to achieving results. A superior in the Vietnamese army noticed that one of the people under his command did not want to work. After a threat that refusal to work might land him in prison produced no reaction, the superior asked the person to stay at his side and do nothing but watch. After days of doing just that, the person began to feel embarrassed at watching his superior work, and he finally asked to be allowed to work. The superior cemented the personal bond between the two further by urging the worker not to hesitate to come to him with any problems he might have in the future; he would be sure to receive help. The result: a good worker for years to come.

Vietnamese in the U.S. yearn for Vietnamese company, which leads to a great deal of interaction within the Vietnamese community. Unfortunately, there is sometimes an undue amount of comparing notes, such as, "I have a new car... a color TV...a great apartment...What do you have?" or, "Look at this great car I just bought for $200.00 (in fact it may have cost $800.00)..." This kind of behavior may be related to the fact that many (over half according to a recent study) Vietnamese refugees perceive themselves to have suffered a loss in social prestige as a result of migration. Seen in this light, "comparing notes" may be an attempt to regain that lost status.

Mental Health: Many of the Vietnamese refugees have experienced extreme suffering during their flight, such as witnessing children, spouses or friends drowning or being raped or killed before their eyes. They worry about family members left behind under uncertain conditions. Their mental stress may surface in a number of ways, such as physical problems, fatigue, insomnia, marital conflicts or anger. Some refugees do not dare to feel good, because as one refugee stated, "When I feel good, I feel guilty." Well-educated persons, especially those who were well established in Vietnam and who face the greatest downward mobility in the U.S., are most likely to suffer from mental stress.

While you do not want to overprotect your refugees, there is little harm in spoiling them with attention. By keeping them busy and not letting them withdraw and brood over past unpleasant experiences, you can help them overcome their depression.

Work: Because Vietnamese refugees are not accustomed to making long range plans and are unfamiliar with job mobility, the sponsor might present the refugees with a number of mini-plans. In this way, they can concentrate on one thing at a time. For example, if they start with learning English, you can make it clear that this is a two-month program. Later, when they hold a low-level job, they may need an occasional reminder that pay is not the most important factor at this point, but that they are, in fact, getting work experience. Many refugees find it easier to have a short-term picture in their minds, rather than being overwhelmed with the total of choices and long-range prospects.

Schooling: Those who did not finish their education or training in Vietnam probably hope to go to school here. Help your refugee decide whether an immediate job with the opportunity to present oneself as a reliable worker and gain work experience or schooling is the appropriate approach toward reaching self-sufficiency. The Vietnamese share a deep respect for education and usually are serious students. At the same time, this attitude accounts for a strong dislike of manual labor. In Vietnam, educated people do not and are not expected to engage in manual labor. Since part-time study and "working your way through college" are also foreign ideas to them, they will need to learn about American educational systems.

Welfare: In the camps and through the grapevine of the Vietnamese communities, many refugees hear about the differences of welfare programs and payments in the various states. They may be less familiar with the disadvantages of welfare, the negative effect it may have on future employment and on their family relationships. Traditionally, the husband may lose respect of his family if he does not provide for the family's well-being. The sponsor might help refugees by making them more aware of the negative aspects of welfare.

Religion: The majority of Vietnamese refugees coming to the United States at this time come from a primarily Buddhist tradition, a tradition which has also absorbed Taoist and Confucian principles to form a holistic world view in which man differs from nature only in degree, not in kind. When invited to attend church by the sponsor, they will usually go along, following their customary behavior of not denying requests from a person they respect; and they do so feeling they are being good guests. However, when they find themselves invited continually they may feel uncomfortable. It might therefore be best to extend a direct invitation only once, and afterwards stress the fact that they should always feel welcome but should base their decision to attend church on their own inclination, rather than on the wishes of the sponsor.

In Vietnam, most families engage in some kind of ancestor worship, which is partially religious and partially an extension of one's filial duty toward one's parents. After a few years in the U.S. this practice is often discontinued.

Privacy: The American concept of privacy differs from that of the Vietnamese. Assuming that Vietnamese prefer having individual and private sleeping quarters like Americans, one sponsor put up two Vietnamese women in a basement apartment complete with two separate bedrooms and a bath, instead of using

the empty bedroom near the family's sleeping quarters, an arrangement which made the women feel as though they were being deliberately isolated and unwelcome.

Vietnamese also tend to think little of being seen in underwear or pajamas by strangers, or even of relieving themselves in public places (especially children). On the other hand, at least until recently, it was considered highly immoral for a young girl and boy to be seen holding hands.

Gifts: It is not uncommon for refugees to bring gifts to the sponsor to show their appreciation. One family presented the sponsor with a live turkey! You may want to explain to them that a "repayment" for your efforts is not necessary. On the other hand, you can also take the opportunity of the Vietnamese New Year's season (Vietnamese, like the Chinese, celebrate their new year according to the lunar calendar) to present your refugees with a small gift. They will appreciate your awareness of their cultural tradition.

To Vietnamese, how you give a present is more important than what you give. While an American may casually place a gift, for example, a book or magazine, on the host's table and just mention in passing that it was brought along, the Vietnamese would find this kind of presentation rude. No matter how small a gift, its value is enhanced tremendously by presenting it properly, that is, holding it with both hands, bowing slightly to the host, while making a little speech to go along with it. The receiver will express his thanks, put the present aside and open it only after the guest has left.

Hospitality: Hospitality is a very important feature in Vietnamese culture. The hosts prepare the best food thay can afford (if poor they may even borrow for the purpose) and always more than the guests can possibly eat. The host serves the guest by placing the choice parts on the guest's dish and continues to do so until the guest leaves the newly given food untouched. Frequently the occasion is made more festive and the guest honored by making a little speech formally stating how much the company of the guest is appreciated. Serving tea after the meal usually signifies to the guest that it is time to leave.

Food: The Vietnamese will be polite and probably eat anything that is put before them, though they are likely to be happy to see rice. Dishes, such as stews, served along with sufficient amounts of white rice are most appropriate. Until they are well familiar with American eating habits, it might be best to avoid meals that imply fixed portions (such as one chop per person). The Vietnamese tend to be unfamiliar with dairy products and their bodies may initially react against them.

Illness: Instead of being accorded what, to the Vietnamese, might seem like an overdose of privacy or isolation, they would much rather receive a great deal of attention and plenty of visitors when ill. Depending on the background of the Vietnamese family, attitudes toward western medicine will vary. Many are familiar with western medical care, though some women find it difficult to be treated by a male doctor. Others continue to rely on their traditional methods and medicine as much as possible. For example, a special kind of "massage"

that leaves black and blue marks on the body is often used as a way to cure the common cold.

Language: Some Vietnamese refugees speak English well when they arrive, others none. More than posing a problem of communication, lack of English sometimes leads to a loss of face. A sense of humor can lighten linguistically difficult moments. When you cannot communicate, laugh. It will put the refugees (and perhaps yourself) at ease.

Offe e guestures: For the first weeks or months it might be well to keep in ,d some of the gestures that the Vietnamese find disrespectful and offensive: speaking loudly; waving people to come; looking directly into another's eyes when talking; and touching the head (such a frequent, almost unconscious motion expressing affection towards children in America).

V. Challenge of Sponsorship

The differences between the American and Vietnamese ways of life are great and may sometimes lead to misunderstanding between you and your refugees. As people who have lost their homeland, they are likely to cling to familiar habits for reassurance. Though the burden of adjustment is upon the refugees, you can actively participate through understanding and help through advice. When you explain American patterns that they must learn, do not do so in terms of good and bad, superior and inferior ways of doing things. Remember that they are simply different. Every society has its own ways and there are advantages and disadvantages to each.

The general friendliness displayed to strangers as well as friends, which is the American way of dealing with people and therefore can be superficial, leads some Vietnamese to assume that all American friendships are shallow. Find a way to show your refugees that you do care deeply. Getting to know the Vietnamese will take time, especially because they do not verbalize their feelings; but patience and a non-judgemental attitude will help you to establish a relationship of trust and form a lasting friendship, which, by itself, can be a tremendously rewarding experience.

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